Fab, Frothy and Fun
Cabrillo Stage’s summer season opens with flashy, yet heartfelt
‘La Cage Aux Folles’ | BY JENNY SIMEONE

La Cage Aux Folles” debuted as a French play in 1973, was made into a film in 1978, and was adapted into a musical in the U.S. in 1983. In 1997, it was reproduced as a comedy film—sans the music—titled Einlagen, starring Robin Williams, Nathan Lane and Gene Hackman. And on July 12, local audiences will have an opportunity to see the play re-imagined once again, this time by Cabrillo Stage.

The musical, which runs through Aug. 11, tells the story of Albin and Georges, a gay couple, who have been together for more than 20 years. Set in France, their lives center around the Saint-Tropez nightclub that Georges owns and operates and where Albin performs as the main attraction: his drag queen alter-ego, Zaza. Troubles arise when Georges’ son, Jean-Michel (the product of a long-standing one-night stand), comes home to announce that he is engaged. Jean-Michel’s fiancée has extremely conservative parents—with a political agenda pointedly against drag clubs—who want to meet their daughter’s future in-laws.

“The play follows how this family goes about making those two worlds meet,” explains director/choreographer Jamie Scott. “It’s essentially a story about the commitment of family. Whether it’s two people who stay together through thick and thin, the love for children, or accepting people for who they are and how people take a stance around that.”

Because of its portrayal of the struggles and triumphs of a gay couple, “La Cage Aux Folles” makes plain statements about equality for the LGBTQ community. Jon Nordgren, producing artistic director and orchestra conductor for Cabrillo Stage, sees the production as “ripped from the headlines.”

“One of the main dialogues going through America today is about gay marriage,” Nordgren says. “This play is just a reminder that two people can have a wonderful lifetime relationship as a couple that is really no different between two men, or a man and a woman, or two women.”

While “La Cage Aux Folles” is as timely as ever for LGBT communities and allies of the Supreme Court’s recent decisions to strike down the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and overturn Prop 8, the play’s thematic resonance goes far deeper than its political implications.

“I don’t think [‘La Cage Aux Folles’] is preachy; the show itself does not talk about legal issues in any way, shape, or form,” reflects Scott. “That isn’t really what its purpose is. It’s very much like other plays and musicals presenting a family story and the challenges they face—and how they aren’t different from you or me at all.”

For Equity actor Tony Panighetti, preparing to play the role of Albin has been a lesson in “being happy with who you are”—a message he believes is applicable to anyone. The challenges of playing Albin go far beyond performing in high heels, dresses and wigs, as Panighetti is juggling two personas.

While Albin is fragile, neurotic, and emotionally sensitive, Zaza is the engaging star performer who goes on stage and takes the spotlight, reflects Panighetti. “There is a good portion of the rehearsal process that is all about harmonizing the transformation between the two sides, while still telling the story of Albin as Georges’ significant other.”

That balancing act is reflected in the large variety of costumes and choreography that the cast has to navigate—from tap dancing, to the can-can, to big show-girl, Vegas-style numbers—all while managing the oscillations between the comedic, serious and touching scenes in the play.

The drama is heightened by music performed by a live orchestra. Cabrillo Stage has brought on more than 50 musicians in total to provide the score for its three summer productions: “La Cage Aux Folles,” “The Good Christian,” (July 26-Aug. 18) and an encore of “Eating Queens” (July 25-Aug. 18).

“Hearing a musical as it was originally done [with a live orchestra] defines [Cabrillo Stage]—it’s why people love our company so much,” says Nordgren. “When you sit in the audience of a show like ‘La Cage Aux Folles,’ you’re going to have 30 actors on stage and 24 musicians in the pit—that’s 54 people … you can imagine how much energy that produces.”

Scott and the cast hope that audiences will be simultaneously entertained and touched by their rendition of the play.

“I think that having an opportunity to be in this world that is being presented in such a positive way is something not only for an audience to celebrate,” Scott notes, “but for my cast to celebrate as well.”

‘La Cage Aux Folles’ runs July 12-Aug. 11 at Cabrillo Stage, 6500 Soquel Drive, Aptos. Tickets are $22-$42. For tickets, call 479-6154 or visit cabrillostage.com.